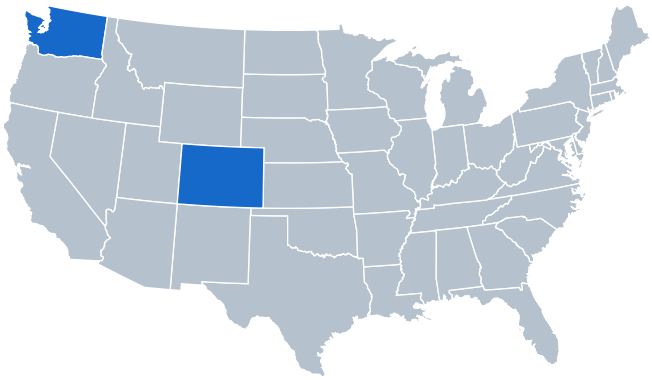
Youth in Foster Care

Youth Involved in the Juvenile Legal System

Highly Mobile Youth: How State Policy and Local Implementation Can Work Together to Support Youth



Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Migrant Youth

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Executive Summary

Highly mobile youth (HMY)—students experiencing homelessness, foster care, migrant mobility, and/or juvenile justice involvement—face disruptions that undermine educational continuity and well-being. States play a pivotal role in coordinating systems across different sectors to address these challenges. This report examines two distinct state models: Colorado's local-first, state-supported approach and Washington's policy-driven, centralized model.

In Colorado, cross-sector work often emerges from districts and local providers, with state policy scaling successful innovations and providing support through grants, convenings, and research partnerships. Washington, by contrast, advances alignment through legislation and state-led workgroups, with strong nonprofit advocacy shaping policy and system integration.

Despite different entry points, both states highlight common themes:

- Youth in foster care and those experiencing homelessness are consistently prioritized, while youth classified as migrant and those involved with the justice system remain less reliably supported.
- Direct service providers play indispensable roles as connectors between youth needs and policy.
- Sustainable cross-sector collaboration requires both institutionalized structures and individual leadership.

From these findings, several priorities for state leaders emerge:

- Align state-level policy while allowing local flexibility.
- Formalize cross-agency collaboration.
- Strengthen data and terminology foundations.
- Build trust in systems.
- Elevate youth voice in decision-making.
- Strengthen protections for youth classified as migrant and for youth involved with the justice system.

Together, these strategies can help states design durable systems that respond to the full spectrum of mobility-related challenges facing HMY.

Glossary of Terms

Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)	Regional cooperative organizations that enable multiple school districts to share educational programs and administrative services—such as special education, professional development, and data management—more efficiently and cost-effectively. BOCES structures are most common in states like Colorado and New York, where they support collaboration among smaller or rural districts. In Washington, similar functions are provided by Educational Service Districts, which coordinate regional support and training on behalf of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).
Child-serving system	A network of organizations, agencies, and institutions that provide supports and services to youth and families across domains such as education, health, child welfare, housing, and juvenile justice.
Dual-system youth	Youth who are simultaneously involved with both the child welfare system and juvenile justice system; sometimes referred to as "crossover youth" or "dually involved youth" (Herz et al., 2012).
Highly mobile youth (HMY)	An umbrella term referring to youth who experience disproportionate rates of high mobility in their living, educational, or social environments, including youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, youth who are migrant, and youth in the juvenile justice system.
Local education agencies (LEAs)	Public authorities responsible for the administration of elementary and secondary education within a specific jurisdiction. In most states, this refers to school districts that oversee local public schools; implement state and federal education programs; and manage funding, staffing, and student services.

Migrant Education Program (MEP)	A federally funded program that provides additional educational support for children and youth who are migrant and have made a qualifying move in the last 36 months due to seasonal agricultural or fishing work (Title I, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965).
Out-of-home placement	Twenty-four-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents under state or agency responsibility, including in foster homes, kinship care, group homes, residential facilities, and shelters (Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). States differ in whether detention or psychiatric facilities are included, creating ambiguity in eligibility for services.
State education agencies (SEAs)	State-level public authorities responsible for overseeing and supporting the administration of elementary and secondary education statewide. SEAs set academic standards; monitor compliance with state and federal requirements; administer statewide funding streams and grant programs; collect and analyze education data; provide technical assistance to districts and schools; and implement statewide initiatives to improve student outcomes.
Youth classified as migrant, or migrant youth	Youth who move from place to place, usually for seasonal agricultural or fishing work, which often disrupts schooling. This classification is distinct from that of immigrants who intend to settle permanently in a new country (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Migrant Education, 2017). States may vary in how they identify migrant status and track these students, which influences program access.

Introduction

A high school senior in Colorado nearly dropped out of school after becoming homeless. Without housing, food, or transportation, she was struggling to meet her basic needs despite being a strong student. Through the Educational Stability Grant Program, her counselor connected her with an emergency shelter as well as services for transportation, clothing, and food. These supports allowed her to remain in school, complete Advanced Placement exams, attend prom, and graduate with her peers. She has since enrolled in college. This is a practical, real-world example of how targeted, coordinated support can stabilize a student's learning environment during a period of significant disruption (Burciaga & Brett, 2022).

Highly mobile youth (HMY)—students experiencing homelessness, foster care, migrant mobility, and/or juvenile justice involvement—are among the most vulnerable and high-need populations of young people. High mobility—defined as frequent relocation or the absence of a stable residence—disrupts school attendance, peer relationships, and connections with caregivers or supportive adults (Sulkowski & Michael, 2020). Because HMY often move across school districts, counties, states, and even national borders, systems struggle to identify and serve them consistently. Incompatible policies, disjointed procedures, and limited data sharing across jurisdictions make coordination especially difficult—particularly in education, where stability depends on sustained, cross-system collaboration at state and regional levels. A substantial body of research links these conditions to poorer academic (Cutuli et al., 2016), health (Braverman & Morris, 2011), and economic (Erb-Downward et al., 2021) outcomes. The combination of high mobility and multisystem involvement leaves HMY easily overlooked or underserved (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025).

The difficulties of serving HMY also expose a deeper issue: Child-serving systems remain largely siloed. Public policy, including laws and regulations, often prioritizes compliance within individual sectors such as education or housing at the expense of whole-child approaches (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025). The result is a patchwork of care that is hard to navigate and insufficient for meeting complex needs. In this way, HMY populations serve

as a "canary in the coal mine," revealing the urgent need for integration across policy, practice, and leadership (Bishop & Willis, 2025). For example, successful school reentry for a young person exiting detention depends on, at the least, coordination among juvenile justice, education, and child welfare systems, which often breaks down.

Cross-sector work, which is essential for addressing these challenges, is the process by which agencies/organizations across two or more areas of focus—such as education, housing, and so on—share information, resources, and activities to advance shared goals or a unified vision (Chuang & Wells, 2010). Aligned systems improve service delivery for HMY, help maximize the impact of limited resources for individual populations, and shift practice from reactive to preventative. And this makes systems better not just for HMY but also for all youth (Turrini et al., 2010; Winters et al., 2016).

This paper is the third installment in a multipart series that shifts the focus from the challenges that HMY populations encounter to solutions. The first paper (Cazares-Minero et al., 2025) describes the characteristics of HMY. The second (Bishop & Willis, 2025) highlights the extent to which traditional policy approaches affecting HMY reinforce agency silos, and it provides actionable strategies for federal and state policymakers. This third paper examines two state models that leverage cross-sector approaches for supporting HMY. It provides concrete examples of what state actors have implemented to better serve these students. States are pivotal actors: They control major funding streams, set the laws and regulations that guide local agencies, and increasingly bear responsibility for coordinating child-serving systems amid shifting federal priorities. Colorado and Washington are highlighted because both states have been recognized for initiating cross-sector collaborations that integrate education, housing, and human services. However, they exemplify two different approaches to this collaboration.

In Colorado, cross-sector work has often emerged from the ground up. The Educational Stability Grant Program (created in 2018 through HB 18-1306) is one of the only state initiatives in the country that provides 3-year grants to districts and other education providers to build community partnerships that address barriers to school stability for highly mobile students. The program's purpose is to reduce educational barriers by supporting academic and social–emotional services that improve attendance, grade-level promotion, and graduation while reducing disciplinary incidents and dropout. In addition to providing direct funding, the state provides technical assistance and shared learning opportunities for grantees. These efforts are further supported by research partnerships with the University of Northern Colorado and the Data Action and Evaluation Lab at the University of Denver, which examine patterns of school mobility and document how districts and providers respond on the ground.

In Washington, by contrast, statewide legislation has been a primary driver of cross-system coordination. Project Education Impact (PEI), created through SB 6032 and expanded through HB 1679, convenes public agencies, legislators, and nonprofit organizations to improve educational outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, or institutional education. The Washington Office of Homeless Youth (a government office within the Department of Commerce), in partnership with A Way Home Washington, has expanded youth homelessness services to nearly every county in the state, supported by philanthropy and public–private partnerships. Additional initiatives, such as the Youth Diversion Infrastructure Project (funded by HB 1905 and private foundations), are piloting flexible, community-based housing supports for youth exiting systems of care. Together, these efforts illustrate a policy-driven, top-down model reinforced by strong collaboration with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

These two state cases offer a valuable comparison of governance strategies: one decentralized and anchored in local practice (Colorado) and the other centralized and driven by policy (Washington). Both demonstrate how states can design systems that promote stability for HMY, and both provide lessons for aligning policy, practice, and partnerships to develop integrated systems that effectively support HMY.

This paper first outlines the research questions and methods used to develop the two state-focused cases presented. Next, it presents background and findings for each state, including best practices and challenges. It then turns to a cross-state synthesis that highlights similarities and differences between Colorado and Washington. Following this is a distillation of key lessons learned from the two cases. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy and practice, along with study limitations and implications.

Methods

A WestEd research team was guided by the following research questions and data sources and analysis to develop the case studies that are the core of this paper.

Research Questions

This study explored three core questions:

1. Which HMY populations are prioritized or overlooked in state policy and practice?
2. What strategies and structures do states use to support HMY?
3. What barriers and future priorities shape cross-sector work for HMY?

Data Sources and Analysis

The research drew on three primary sources of evidence:

- **Interviews:** The research team conducted 22 semistructured interviews with leaders and practitioners in Colorado (*N* = 13) and Washington (*N* = 9) with experience in education, child welfare, housing, juvenile justice, and nonprofit sectors. Both state- and local-level perspectives were included. Interviews were thematically coded using a framework of cross-sector collaboration (aligned supports, monitoring and accountability, prevention) (see Appendices A and B).
- **Policy Scan:** The research team reviewed relevant state and federal policies that shape service delivery for HMY. Documents were coded for eligibility criteria (which youth were included) and alignment dimensions (systems integration, monitoring, and prevention) (see Appendix C).
- **Student Data:** The research team examined state-level data on the size and outcomes of HMY populations to provide context for the case studies. These analyses were exploratory and are presented in Appendix D.

Colorado

Background

This section provides context on Colorado's service landscape and recent policy developments related to HMY. It highlights the decentralized structure in which local education agencies (LEAs) and county-level departments deliver most services under state oversight, and it outlines the policies that have shaped Colorado's approach since 2018.

Agency and Service Landscape

Colorado's service landscape is decentralized, with LEAs playing central roles under state oversight.

LEAs, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), and county human services departments administer most programs on a day-to-day basis, with oversight provided by the state education agency (SEA), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) (see Table 1). The CDE oversees federal education programs for students experiencing homelessness (McKinney-Vento), students classified as migrant (Migrant Education Program [MEP]), and the state's program to support students in foster care. Child welfare and human services are housed within the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) but administered at the county level. Housing supports are coordinated through the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) Office of Homeless Youth (OHY), while nonprofit organizations provide most housing and homelessness services. Juvenile justice falls under the Division of Youth Services within the CDHS, with services delivered through regional and local providers.

Table 1. Key Entities Involved in Service Delivery for HMY in Colorado

System(s)	Primary HMY populations served	Key entities	Summary role
Education	Homeless, foster, migrant, justice-involved	CDE, LEAs, BOCES	Local districts lead implementation; the state provides guidance; BOCES support rural coordination.
Human services and child welfare	Foster	CDHS, county human services departments	The state oversees programs; counties manage them locally.
Housing and homeless services	Homeless	DOLA, OHY, nonprofits	The OHY sets the statewide strategy; nonprofit organizations deliver most services directly to youth.
Juvenile justice	Justice-involved	CDHS (Division of Youth Services), contracted providers	The state sets standards and provides oversight; regional and local providers, including residential and community-based programs, deliver services.

Policy Timeline

Since 2018, Colorado has steadily broadened its policy efforts to support HMY (see Box 1). Early legislation focused on youth in the foster care system, and more recent laws have extended stability provisions to youth experiencing homelessness, migrant mobility, and/or justice system involvement.

Box 1: Colorado Policy Milestones, 2018–2024

2018

HB 18-1306 established the Educational Stability Grant Program to reduce school disruptions for youth in foster care; later broadened to include youth experiencing homelessness and youth classified as migrant. The legislation appropriated approximately $2.8 million in its first year and created the Educational Stability Grant Fund as an ongoing program subject to annual appropriations (Colorado General Assembly, 2018; Colorado Revised Statutes, 2023). In its first 2 years, the CDE awarded roughly $800,000 per year in competitive grants to local education providers, with recent appropriations increasing to about $1.04 million in fiscal year (FY) 2024–25 (Burciaga & Brett, 2022; S.B. 25-206, 2025).

2020

HB 20-1122 expanded services for youth experiencing homelessness, including access to shelter without parental consent. The bill established a grant program under the DOLA to support outreach, drop-in centers, emergency shelters, and transitional living programs, authorizing up to five awards of $250,000 each to be distributed by January 1, 2021 (H.B. 20-1122, 2020). The grant program was time limited, with its enabling statute repealed effective July 1, 2023, indicating that this was a one-time initiative rather than an ongoing annual appropriation (Colorado General Assembly, 2020).

2022

HB 22-1374 launched the Fostering Opportunities Program, contracting with districts to improve educational outcomes for youth in out-of-home placements by requiring the CDE and the CDHS to enter into data-sharing agreements, set measurable goals for student outcomes, and contract with school districts (from two to five districts, subject to available funding) for implementation (Foster Youth Success Act, 2022; Colorado Revised Statutes, 2024). The act included appropriations of $210,677 to the CDE and $563,568 to the CDHS for FY 2022–23, and it established enduring reporting requirements (Foster Youth Success Act, 2022).

2024

HB 24-1216 created a Student Bill of Rights and established the Justice Engaged Youth Working Group to strengthen cross-sector coordination.

Effective Practices

This section presents findings from Colorado, focusing on promising practices that emerged from district-led initiatives and on the challenges that persist in creating consistent supports across HMY populations. Together, these findings illustrate how local-first strategies interact with state-level policy and funding.

Educational Stability as the Anchor

A central strategy in Colorado has been allocating funds directly to school districts to design and implement programs that serve multiple HMY populations. The Educational Stability Grant (HB 18-1306) is a primary mechanism, providing funding for supports targeting students who are migrant, students in foster care, and students experiencing homelessness. The grant requires coordination with local and state agencies. It supports implementation of strategies to strengthen school stability—such as improving attendance, reducing disciplinary incidents, increasing grade-level promotion, lowering dropout rates, and raising graduation and completion rates. The Fostering Opportunities Program (HB 22-1374), overseen by the CDHS, is another example of education-centered cross-sector collaboration. While focused specifically on youth in foster care, the program is designed to deepen partnerships between the CDHS and participating school districts to improve educational outcomes.

Local First Innovation With State Support

The state encourages school districts to partner with community-based organizations and uses convening, training, and technical assistance to support collaboration between education agencies and entities in other sectors. The CDE's annual Regional Collaborative Conversations provide a space for school and service providers to engage in joint learning on student mobility and schoolwide supports. These convenings also help the CDE surface local implementation practices and spotlight effective partnerships. An SEA staff member highlighted a set of school districts partnering with Almost Home to support youth experiencing homelessness or in foster care:

> *The role we aim to play is to spotlight examples of where [partnerships] have worked and get that information about best practices to local agencies and organizations working with students.*

Programs in Colorado have sometimes scaled from local innovations, such as the Fostering Opportunities Program. The state's local-first strategy prioritizes learning from district-developed approaches and building infrastructure to support broader adoption. This ethos has also shaped how state agencies operate: Interview participants emphasized that collaboration across CDE offices and with other agencies is driven by a desire to reflect and reinforce the kind of partnerships taking place in local communities. As an SEA staff member explained,

> *I really believe that in Colorado specifically our best work comes from grassroots work, from communities who are coming up with ways to better identify, serve, and support these students. We need to spotlight and highlight these solutions and replicate them across the state. And that's what our role is at the state level: to bring awareness to practitioners about where their numbers are at, where the gaps and overlaps are. … That is also what has driven our work together [at the state] across offices and agencies: We need to model this approach.*

Research–Practice Partnerships

The CDE and the CDHS have partnered with institutions such as the University of Northern Colorado and the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver to analyze administrative and program data that inform efforts to support HMY. These collaborations have examined indicators such as school stability, attendance, credit accumulation, and graduation across student groups, providing insights that guide policy design, program development, and implementation. In addition to evaluating specific initiatives such as Fostering Opportunities, these partnerships have identified common barriers across HMY populations. As an SEA staff member explained,

> *The Colorado Lab has helped highlight similarities in the challenges these populations face—staying stable in school, accessing support—and that research is beginning to influence day-to-day practices, helping practitioners recognize students with similar needs and connect them with the right supports.*

This growing awareness of crosscutting barriers has informed strategies that are more cohesive at both the state and local levels.

Challenges

Limited Support for Youth Involved With the Justice System

Compared to policies that address other populations of HMY, fewer policies explicitly include youth involved with the justice system. Interviews identified limited information sharing and cross-system fragmentation as major barriers to effective identification and support. The systems responsible for these youth span sectors including education, justice, and human services. Schooling for this population occurs in facility schools, local schools, and alternative programs. An SEA administrator whose work focuses on student engagement reported that the interagency Justice Engaged Youth Working Group found "an incredible disconnect" between responsible entities. Its 2024 report cited a lack of standardized data procedures, restricted data sharing, and inconsistent terminology, all of which hinder identification and handoffs between agencies to promote timely service delivery.

Local concerns about collecting information on youth involved with the justice system also emerged in interviews as a barrier to identification and support. The same SEA administrator noted that privacy concerns and fears of differential treatment can (understandably) drive resistance:

> *From a student advocacy lens, a lot of folks have pushed back [against information sharing for justice-involved youth]. Maybe a school district doesn't need to know if a student has a shoplifting charge in July and paid a fine or did community service over the summer. … Folks say [that record] potentially changes how that school treats that kid, in a negative way.*

Misconceptions and Narrow Definitions for Youth Who Are Migrant

Although students classified as migrant are eligible for Colorado's Educational Stability Grant and benefit from strong partnerships between the CDE and the MEP, interviews highlighted persistent barriers to identification and access to services. A state-level director overseeing migrant education explained that confusion over the term "migrant" and strict eligibility rules hinder identification and service delivery. A common "media definition" equates "migrant" with being undocumented and "illegal," prompting resistance to accepting funding provided by the MEP. To counter immigration-related challenges, a state-level administrator working in migrant education frequently cites civil rights protections and the legal precedent set by *Plyler v. Doe*:

> *I cite [*Plyler v. Doe*] almost weekly. I get questions like, "'Why are we paying to educate kids from other nations?' ... And even to State Board members, they ask me, "'How many illegals are we providing education for?" And I say, 'Because of* Plyler v. Doe*, I'm not at liberty to ask. Because of* Plyler v. Doe*, you have to provide an equal education.'*

Some school leaders also resist the designation. The administrator described a superintendent who denied having students who are migrant despite 23 being identified by the MEP—reflecting broader reluctance rooted in misconceptions about citizenship:

> *There is a lot of push back, all the time, everywhere, to designating kids as migrant. A huge part of my job is explaining and using federal law that says here is the legal definition for these kids: They are migrant. So, we're going to provide services.*

Eligibility criteria further narrow access: A parent must be legally authorized to work in the United States and employed in agriculture, fishing, or dairy, excluding other high-mobility sectors like construction or tourism. Eligibility is limited to 36 months from the qualifying move, creating a short window for identifying and serving students. As the administrator observed, "The clock starts ticking when the work is done and when the move is done. I have 36 months to find [migrant youth] and serve them."

Inconsistent Terminology Across Agencies

State agency staff—particularly at the CDE and the CDHS—collaborate across offices and with each other to support shared implementation goals, and they provide guidance and technical assistance that encourage districts and local service providers to coordinate across sectors. These efforts have built a strong foundation for cross-system work despite fragmented program structures. However, few formal policy mechanisms exist to align terminology, codify interagency goals, or sustain cross-sector efforts statewide. A state higher education agency personnel member explained:

> *There aren't a lot of parallels to how our state agencies are run and are managing programs responsible for youth in foster care. ... It can make it difficult to know even who to contact and to make sure that we're aligned on some of the similar goals to provide services and funding for these services.*

Interviews highlighted that the terminology used in state statutes to refer to HMY is often vague, leading to confusion about which youth are eligible for specific supports and which agencies are responsible for providing them. This ambiguity creates barriers to

coordinated service delivery and impedes the ability to tailor supports to different HMY populations. For example, a state-level coordinator for foster care education noted that state policy uses "out-of-home placements" interchangeably with foster care, raising questions about whether it includes detention facilities or psychiatric care. The CDHS is the primary agency for youth in such facilities, but jurisdiction remains unclear, according to a state-level coordinator who was interviewed. School-level supports (e.g., Child Welfare Educational Liaisons) are trained specifically for students with child-welfare involvement.

These definitional issues also impact the state's ability to understand trends in educational outcomes. When "out-of-home placement" spans diverse settings (facility schools, youth corrections, alternative campuses, traditional schools), it is difficult to interpret outcome trends and target supports. A state-level administrator overseeing student services emphasized the need for disaggregation to tailor services:

> *One of the biggest barriers for us right now ... is what educational setting are the foster students in. [Out-of-home placement] can mean a facility school, youth corrections facility, alternative education campus, or traditional school. The [Child Welfare Educational Liaisons] are not experts in juvenile justice systems. And the strategies and understanding of the numbers: We might have a graduation rate of 33 percent for foster. But if we were able to disaggregate the data, we might see that 6 percent of students are graduating out of detention facility programs, whereas 70 percent might be graduating out of our traditional day programs. ... There's no way to evaluate these differences and provide educational services that meet the unique needs of students as the system is currently set up.*

Data Sharing and Privacy Constraints

Colorado maintains a cautious approach to student data, and the interviews highlighted that additional safeguards around information about HMY, while important, can limit the

ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of students' needs and experiences. As an SEA administrator whose work focuses on student engagement noted,

> *We already have a strict or cautious data environment in Colorado, and for this group of students [HMY] it is even more so. Being able to understand data and point to who these students are, where there are challenges and where things are going well for our services across systems and align on that … we can't do this if we don't have a complete picture of what's happening with these youth.*

Because of these restrictions, staff often must tie data collection and sharing to explicit policy mandates. Another state-level administrator overseeing student services explained:

> *If we went to upper-level leadership and told them that we're looking at the different education settings of youth in foster care, they would ask where the federal or state mandate is. So the connection to policy is, how can we be clear in the statute about the kind of information we need to collect?*

Data-sharing agreements between the CDE and other agencies, such as the CDHS, have improved coordination but remain complex and time intensive—taking "months and months," even with legislative authorization, an SEA administrator described.

Washington

Background

This section describes Washington's organizational and policy landscape for HMY. Unlike Colorado, Washington has advanced cross-sector collaboration primarily through statewide legislation, supported by partnerships with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

Agency and Service Landscape

Washington's service system is relatively centralized, with key responsibilities housed at the state level.

The SEA, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), leads education programs for HMY, while the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) oversees child welfare, juvenile justice, and early learning under a unified structure (see Table 2). Housing and homeless services are administered by the Department of Commerce, Office of Homeless Youth (OHY), with local providers delivering services on the ground. Cross-sector coordination is often initiated at the state level through interagency workgroups, legislative mandates, and data-sharing agreements between key agencies, such as the OSPI and the DCYF.

Table 2. Overview of Key Entities Involved in Service Delivery for HMY in Washington

System(s)	Primary HMY populations served	Key entities	Summary role
Education	Homeless, foster, migrant, justice-involved	OSPI, school districts	The state provides centralized support and guidance; districts are responsible for putting plans into action locally.
Human services and child welfare	Foster	DCYF, regional offices, community providers	Unified agency structure facilitates cross-program integration at the state level.
Housing and homeless services	Homeless	Department of Commerce (OHY), nonprofits, housing authorities	The state administers funding and programs; local providers lead implementation.
Juvenile justice	Justice-involved	DCYF—Juvenile Rehabilitation; county juvenile courts; community-based providers	The state provides oversight through the DCYF; services are often delivered at the county level in coordination with juvenile courts and local providers.

Policy Timeline

Since 2018, Washington has enacted a robust set of policies formalizing cross-sector collaboration for HMY (see Box 2). Legislation has steadily expanded eligibility and strengthened alignment across education, child welfare, housing, and justice systems.

Box 2: Washington Policy Milestones, 2018–2024

2018

SB 6032 established PEI to align education, child welfare, and housing agencies for youth in foster care and those experiencing homelessness. The initiative was originally created through a budget proviso directing the OSPI to convene a cross-agency workgroup to identify barriers and recommend strategies to improve educational outcomes (S.B. 6032, 2018). Since the workgroup's inception, the Legislature has continued to provide targeted appropriations to sustain the workgroup and implementation activities, including $150,000 in FY 2023 for the OSPI to administer the initiative and $75,000 in FY 2024 for continued coordination and reporting (OSPI, 2024; Washington Association of School Administrators, 2023).

SB 6560 prohibited discharges into homelessness from foster care, juvenile rehabilitation, or behavioral health facilities.

2019

SB 5290 phased out use of detention for status offenses (e.g., truancy, running away).

2021

HB 1140 ensured that youth receive legal consultation before waiving their rights during law-enforcement contact, requiring officers to connect juveniles with an attorney prior to custodial interrogation, searches, or rights waivers.

HB 1227 raised standards for child removal and prioritized kinship placements.

2022

HB 1955 standardized foster care definitions across education statutes, improving consistency.

2023

HB 1679 expanded PEI to include youth involved with the justice system.

2024

SB 5908/SB 5904 extended foster care eligibility to age 21 and expanded flexibility for college financial aid (Passport to College Promise).

Effective Practices

This section summarizes findings from Washington, highlighting both effective strategies and areas of ongoing difficulty in serving HMY. The state's policy-driven model shows how codified structures can increase consistency while also revealing where connections to practice, specifically at districts and in schools, remain limited.

Legislated Cross-Sector Collaboration

Cross-sector work is sometimes codified in legislation. An example is PEI, a legislatively mandated workgroup consisting of the OSPI, the DCYF, the OHY, legislators, and several nonprofit organizations (Building Changes, College Success Foundation, Equity in Education Coalition, the Mockingbird Society, and Treehouse). PEI plays two critical roles at the state level: (a) aligning, coordinating, and monitoring policy, services, resources, and outcomes across systems and (b) leveraging data both for real-time, individualized educational support and for longitudinal analysis of student outcomes. Its charge is to evaluate the educational needs of students living in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or exiting juvenile rehabilitation and to make recommendations for policy, funding, and practice. A senior leader at Treehouse shared the following:

> *Project Education Impact organizes our systems around the fact that youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth who are incarcerated have similar educational conditions and outcomes. We identify the overlaps and where there might need to be population-specific investments at the state level. The group organizes around the shared goal of achieving educational parity for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and/or incarceration from preK through postsecondary education, and [around closing] the disparities between racial groups by 2027.*

Recognizing Housing as Central to Mobility

Recent policies focus on interventions to support HMY outside of education, specifically in housing. For example, the Homeless Student Stability Program, created by SB 6298 and overseen by the state's OHY, provides grants to districts to develop early identification and partnerships with housing organizations. And SB 6560 prevents youth from being discharged into homelessness from systems of care, including behavioral health facilities, foster care, and juvenile rehabilitation.

There are important linkages between housing instability and systems involvement, making the

policy move to intervene on housing a key preventative approach. Youth in foster care experience disproportionately higher rates of homelessness than do youth in the general population, with rates ranging from 11 percent to 37 percent. Likewise, there are higher rates of juvenile justice system involvement among youth experiencing homelessness (e.g., Dion et al., 2014).

Interviewees recognized these associations in describing the rationale behind the policy focus on housing as a key preventative approach to mitigate mobility. A nonprofit policy director explained:

> *There is a population of young people that experience both systems involvement and housing instability. These are some of our most vulnerable youth. Housing instability can make these young people even more likely to bounce around between the justice system and child welfare system. So making sure we help create housing stability for these young people is a central focus of [our organization's] work around policy and funding.*

Nonprofits Bridging Services and Systems

A major catalyst for this work has been statewide nonprofit organizations that work at the local and state levels to align policies, procedures, and supports for HMY across systems. The organizations mentioned in the interviews as significant players were Treehouse (youth with foster care, homelessness, and incarceration experiences), Building Changes (youth and adults who have experienced homelessness), and the Mockingbird Society (youth with foster care and homelessness experiences). A senior leader at Treehouse described the organization as having this two-pronged approach:

> *We provide direct service, and a suite of services, including education support, material resources, and financial resources for youth. The other thing that we do is policy, advocacy, and systems change work. This includes lobbying in the legislature for both law and funding investments that would improve the life or educational outcomes of youth, as well as leading coalitional groups across agencies and regional partners who are doing work for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and/or incarceration.*

This dual position allows the organization to have insight into what is going on with youth on the ground, what their needs are and what supports are being offered to them, and how to create

and improve systems-level service delivery. The systems-level advocacy role of these organizations is also evident in their legislative record. They have proposed and lobbied for a number of policies related to greater funding and investments for HMY and improved systems alignment (e.g., HB 1955, SB 5904).

Standardized Terminology and Data Sharing

Inconsistent terminology can create significant challenges for identifying and serving HMY, a challenge raised in the interviews as having formerly impacted state-level work for HMY. An administrator at Washington's child welfare agency explained:

> *When I was at the state education agency, ... we pulled together all of the state laws or Revised Codes of Washington that were related to foster care and education. At the time, they all used different kinds of language. Some said students in foster care, some said student in out-of-home placement. It was all over the place.*

To address this kind of inconsistency, Washington has taken steps to align definitions across systems. The administrator noted that the state enacted legislation to revise and standardize terminology:

> *[Washington State] wrote legislation and changed our state definitions. We came up with a definition of foster care youth that would ... serve as many young people as we can.*

Through HB 1955, state education statutes were updated to include youth who are the "subject of a dependency hearing," broadening eligibility and improving consistency across agencies. This alignment enables earlier identification and ensures that both youth currently in foster care and those who are at risk of being involved with the child welfare system can access educational supports.

In addition to having aligned definitions, Washington has developed shared data systems that improve coordination among agencies. While privacy restrictions can pose challenges, formal agreements between education and child welfare entities has streamlined access to up-to-date information. "It's significantly easier for districts and agencies to identify youth and determine who should be responsible for providing services to them," a state-level child welfare agency administrator shared. Data is updated nightly, giving school districts and partner organizations such as Treehouse real-time access that facilitates timely support and coordinated service delivery.

Challenges

Underrepresentation of Youth Classified as Migrant

Youth classified as migrant were largely absent from recent HMY policies and did not surface in interviews despite Washington having the nation's second-largest population (after California) of students classified as migrant. Participants often noted overlaps among homelessness, foster care, and justice involvement, but not for youth classified as migrant. One reason for this gap is that youth who are migrant in Washington often live in rural areas, which could make them less visible at the state level.

Stigma and Fragmented Support for Youth Involved With the Justice System

Stigma and diffuse interagency responsibilities were cited as key barriers. A coordinator with the state child welfare agency observed, "People just turn a blind eye to the young people involved with juvenile justice services because they did something wrong and now they have to serve their time," contrasting this with more sympathetic perceptions of youth in foster care. Education delivery is also complicated for these youth: The child welfare agency runs juvenile facilities, while the SEA and nearby districts are responsible for schooling. A senior nonprofit leader observed limited "shared responsibility," with child welfare and education agencies deferring to each other, resulting in gaps in access and quality.

Limited District-Level Engagement

While the state has advanced broad coordination across child welfare, housing, and justice systems, interviewees emphasized that collaboration with school districts is a key area for continued progress. A senior leader at Treehouse noted that prior efforts were "very focused on child welfare policy" but that meaningful support for HMY also requires intentional focus on the educational system: "This is where we need to continue to be headed." The senior leader explained that while state-level policy and interagency work are important, district practices ultimately determine whether HMY are identified and supported. A growing priority is partnering directly with school districts to help them understand shared challenges across HMY populations and to adopt integrated practices:

One of the things we are wondering now in our work is if we could partner with districts to improve their practices for HMY. How can we help them see overlaps between the populations to maximize impact?

As Washington advances its cross-sector efforts, the focus is shifting from broad state-level alignment to local implementation whereby districts and schools serve as the central site of coordination for HMY. A state-level child welfare administrator emphasized the value of "holding an annual convening or conference where we bring together schools, social workers, community-based organizations like Treehouse, court-appointed advocates and lawyers" to foster networking and knowledge-sharing among those working directly with youth. This approach underscores a shift from state-level systems and policy work toward structured opportunities for local interest holders to collaborate, share best practices, and build capacity.

Cross-State Synthesis

This section compares findings from Colorado and Washington, identifying common themes across both cases and important differences in approach. It serves as a bridge between the state-level findings and the broader lessons learned.

Similarities

The two states share numerous commonalities in their experiences of supporting HMY populations.

Youth in Foster Care and Youth Experiencing Homelessness as Policy Priorities

Over the past 30 years, federal legislation, including the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), has driven significant investments in educational supports for youth in foster care and those experiencing homelessness. ESSA extended McKinney-Vento protections to youth in foster care, mandated points of contact in schools, and required states to develop transportation and school stability plans. Both Washington and Colorado have implemented a wave of related policies since ESSA took effect in the 2017–18 school year, and the most recent legislation concerning HMY in both states has focused on these two populations (e.g., foster care and homelessness). Interviewees also cited these populations as central to their work and identified ESSA as a catalyst for interagency coordination.

Recognition of Overlapping Needs and Shared Outcomes

Recognition of overlapping outcomes (e.g., chronic absence, high dropout rate, low 4-year graduation rate) and needs (e.g., educational stability, housing stability) across HMY populations was central to the cross-sector work described in the interviews. Both states highlighted that cross-population approaches to HMY service delivery can make more efficient use of limited resources by pooling funding streams and avoiding service duplication.

As one state-level administrator working in migrant education in Colorado explained,

> *[Our office] saw that we're dealing with the same kids who have a lot of the same needs, and we provide the same kinds of services. Collaborating and working with others [in the department] who support different populations of youth who are highly mobile is the best way because funding for my program alone is not sufficient to do and give the kids everything that they need to have.*

A similar perspective was shared by a senior leader at Treehouse in Washington:

> *As child-serving systems are currently set up, there is limited shared investment in shared outcomes. Seeing the outcomes as overlapping, that really improves shared investment from systems that work with different populations of HMY. Because our systems are set up to treat outcomes from different populations like they're separate, but the reality is that they are not.*

These perspectives illustrate a shared recognition that siloed approaches fall short and that cross-population strategies are not only more efficient but also more responsive to the realities of youth who experience multiple forms of mobility.

Direct Service Providers as Catalysts for the Work

While state-level leaders who were interviewed often credited ESSA or individual champions for sparking cross-sector efforts, local practitioners described collaboration as a natural and necessary response to the realities of HMY. For them, cross-sector work did not require a mandate; it was simply what worked.

A Colorado district leader explained how the Family and Community Services Unit expanded to serve multiple HMY populations by focusing on shared needs:

> *It didn't matter which category we put them in. These students, all highly mobile, had similar needs. … We started absorbing these different populations into our department because we could see that all these students needed to be served together.*

Situating HMY offices within broader departments also helped districts link students more efficiently to community resources. A Washington nonprofit leader at Northstar Advocates, which works to prevent homelessness among youth, described similar patterns across systems:

> *In our work within the behavioral health system, we saw that so many youth … who came out of inpatient behavioral health treatment are homeless within 3 to 12 months. … It's easy for us to see those gaps and see the different populations of youth that are affected.*

Across both states, direct service providers stressed that system boundaries rarely reflect youth experiences, underscoring the need for cross-sector collaboration.

Differences

Despite having broad similarities, the two states also represent distinct approaches and experiences in supporting HMY populations.

Local-First Versus Policy-Driven Models

Both Washington and Colorado embed cross-population priorities into their cross-sector strategies, but the level of intervention differs. Washington emphasizes aligning state policy and systems, while Colorado focuses more on strengthening partnerships between districts and local service providers.

In Colorado, this local reality is more explicitly acknowledged in state-level policy and practice. As one SEA administrator explained,

> *A school district might be funded from this grant or that, ... but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter where that funding comes from for that family or child. The service is what they need, and that is all that matters. Our local partners—at schools, districts—see that and are already incorporating this into how they provide services.*

Colorado's strategy centers on funding districts to design integrated approaches that address the needs of multiple HMY populations collectively, with state policy scaling successful local innovations more broadly.

Degrees of Inclusion for Youth Who Are Migrant and Those Who Are Justice-Involved

Washington has the second-largest migrant student population nationally, yet youth who are migrant remain absent from recent legislation and were not mentioned in interviews. By contrast, youth involved with the justice system have gained visibility through HB 1679, which expanded PEI to include them, and through HB 1701, which shifted educational oversight in juvenile facilities to the SEA, improving coordination. Even so, fragmented agency responsibilities and stigma tied to system involvement continue to limit support.

Colorado shows a contrasting pattern. Youth identified as migrant are explicitly included in initiatives such as the Educational Stability Grant Program (HB 18-1306), and interviewees described visible collaboration across the MEP and related offices. Respondents highlighted that data reveal overlaps between students who are migrant and those who are experiencing homelessness, leading to shared programming, and they noted close coordination with Homeless Education, Dropout Prevention, and Foster Care staff to

align efforts and maximize impact. Youth involved in the justice system, however, remain less integrated. While HB 24-1216 established a Student Bill of Rights and an interagency working group, inclusion in statewide educational stability efforts is still limited, hindered by disconnected data systems and unclear accountability.

Terminology and Data Approaches

Interviewees in both states highlighted terminology and data sharing as central barriers or enablers of cross-sector work. In Colorado, interest holders pointed to persistent ambiguity in terms such as "out-of-home placement," which creates uncertainty about whether policies apply to detention, foster care, or psychiatric facilities. This lack of clarity complicates cross-agency coordination and makes it harder to develop consistent data systems. Interviewees also noted that restrictive privacy rules and the need for legislative authorization slow the negotiation of data-sharing agreements, delaying the ability to identify students and provide timely supports.

Washington has moved further toward alignment by enacting HB 1955, which standardizes foster care definitions across education statutes, reducing confusion across agencies. In addition, formal agreements between the OSPI and the DCYF enable near-real-time data sharing with districts and nonprofit partners. Interest holders described these systems as critical for early identification and intervention. However, they also noted that the infrastructure is resource-intensive to maintain and still depends on strong interagency collaboration.

The two states illustrate contrasting positions: Colorado continues to grapple with definitional and legal barriers that limit coordination. At the same time, Washington demonstrates how legislated clarity and structured agreements can improve responsiveness but also require sustained investment and oversight to remain effective.

Sustainability Strategies

Interviewees consistently emphasized the role of individuals with cross-agency experience—often those who had previously worked in schools, districts, or other departments—in initiating and sustaining cross-sector work. Their familiarity with policies, procedures, organizational cultures, and existing networks positioned them to recognize overlapping needs across HMY populations and act on opportunities for alignment.

As one former SEA administrator in Colorado explained,

> *I work closely with the state education agency because I used to work there. I meet weekly with the person who went into my old position, and we try to see where there are gaps. Where do we still need to provide technical support, guidance, or legislative changes?*

Another Colorado respondent emphasized the value of this experience, noting,

> *Ideally, you want people on the team to have cross-agency experience ... staff having been a part of other units and agencies—it's experience, knowledge, and networks we use every day.*

At the same time, reliance on individual champions was identified as a vulnerability. Building relationships, understanding cross-agency systems, and coordinating efforts requires significant time and resources, and staff turnover can quickly disrupt progress. As one interviewee cautioned,

> *It can't just be champions at a time and place collaborating together. ... The work needs to continue even when there are changes in staffing.*

This concern prompted calls in Colorado for more formalized structures, including legislative backing, to ensure continuity. Washington, by comparison, has enacted policies more frequently to institutionalize collaboration. But interviewees there still flagged vulnerabilities. As one nonprofit leader reflected,

> *One of the biggest challenges is that I don't know how collective the work ends up being. ... If we don't have those voices, I'm not sure how much will end up getting done.*

Even with legislative support, sustainability remains tied to leadership continuity and the composition of participating groups. Both states illustrate the tension between institutionalizing collaboration and relying on individual champions to drive the work forward.

Lessons Learned

This section distills high-level insights that emerge from the two cases. These lessons highlight the trade-offs between different approaches and the conditions that enable or hinder cross-sector collaboration for HMY.

State Alignment and Local Flexibility

The two states illustrate different but complementary approaches: Colorado builds from local innovation, scaling district-led pilots through state support, while Washington codifies structures and expectations through legislation. Both approaches offer strengths and limitations. Local-first models ensure that solutions are responsive to community context, but they can create uneven implementation across the state because the more organic nature of building capacity may come without established networks for sharing and adopting similar practices. Policy-driven models provide consistency and potential durability but risk being disconnected from day-to-day practice and the varying needs of different communities across wide social, economic, and geographic contexts. The lesson is that effective systems require *both* alignment from the state *and* flexibility for local adaptation. And achieving quality implementation must balance the assets (and manage tensions) inherent in both approaches. An effective approach to this balance was developed in California through the CalHHS Ecosystem Paper (California Health & Human Services Agency, n.d.).

Patterns of Inclusion and Omission in Policy and Practice Across HMY Populations

When HMY populations are not explicitly named in policy or funding streams, they are at risk of being overlooked. Colorado has extended eligibility for its Educational Stability Grant Program to include students who are migrant, while youth who are involved with the justice system remain less consistently named or supported. In Washington, the reverse trend appears: Youth involved with the justice system have recently been incorporated into PEI, but youth who are migrant remain largely absent from policy.

Across both states, less consistent explicit support has meant that services for omitted groups have been contingent on local champions, short-term projects, or discretionary funds rather than guaranteed through stable funding or statutory mandate. Some interviewees

described this as patchwork provision: Some districts have had strong supports in place, while others have had few or none. The result is that the very populations not named in statute are also those for whom continuity and equity of support are most difficult to achieve. These patterns suggest that failing to explicitly recognize a population in policy can limit the resources and reliability of service delivery, even if unintentionally.

Legislative Codification Plus Individual Leadership

Washington demonstrates how legislation can institutionalize cross-sector collaboration, creating structures that survive beyond changes in leadership. Colorado shows how champions with cross-agency experience can initiate and sustain collaboration even without statutory mandates. But both states also reveal the risks of overreliance on one side of the equation. Legislation without leadership may stall in implementation, while leadership without formalized structures may collapse with turnover. The most sustainable strategies pair codification with leaders who can translate policy into practice.

Data and Definitions as Foundations for the Work

Ambiguity in definitions and fragmented data systems limit coordination and timely intervention. Colorado interest holders described how terms such as “out-of-home placement” create confusion across agencies and how restrictive privacy policies delay data-sharing agreements. Washington, by contrast, has standardized foster care definitions across education statutes (HB 1955) and built data systems for real-time information-sharing across agencies. Even so, maintaining such systems requires ongoing resources and collaboration. States cannot build durable cross-sector strategies without first establishing clarity in terminology and strong mechanisms for data exchange.

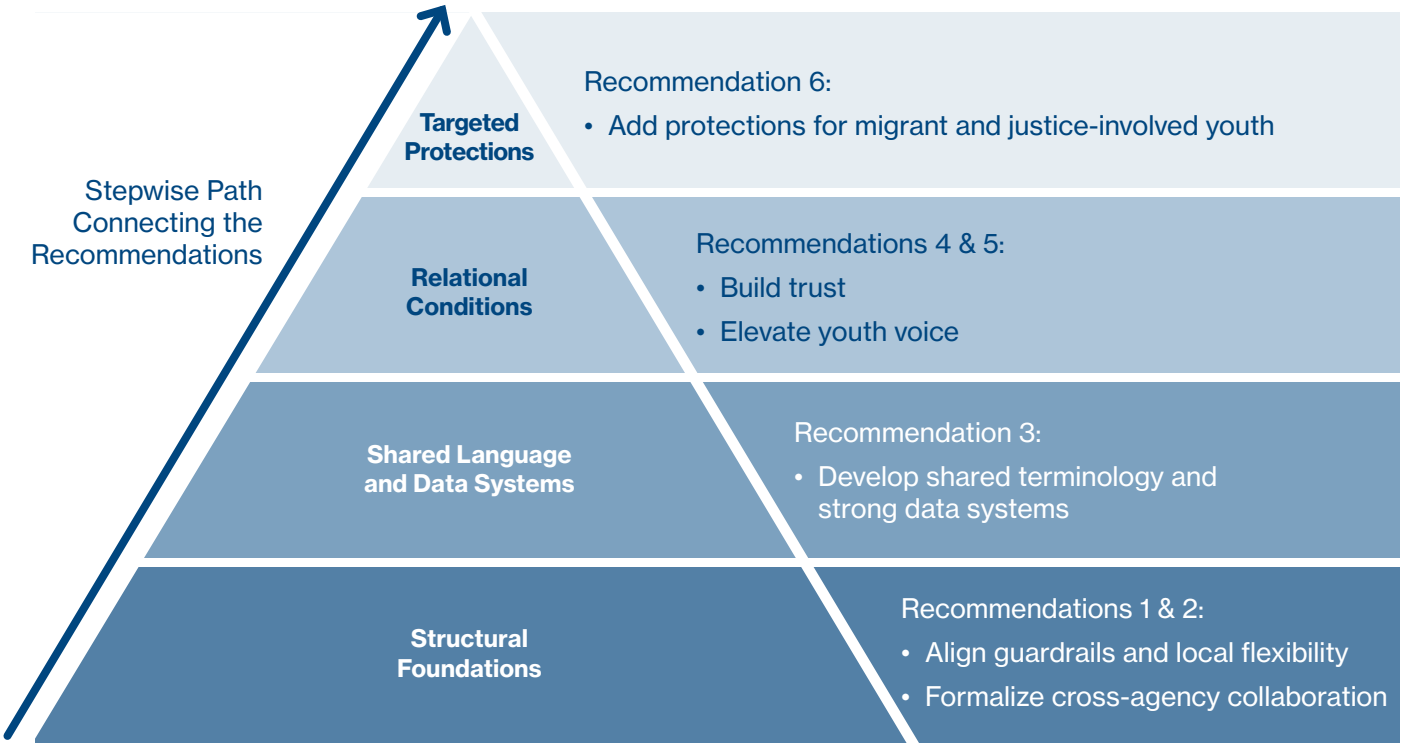
Direct Service Providers as Connectors of Policy and Practice

Across both states, those working most closely with youth emphasized that cross-sector collaboration is less a mandate than a necessity. Practitioners described how program silos dissolve in practice because the same youth cycle through multiple systems, and services are more efficient when designed collectively. Situating HMY initiatives within broader offices, for example, allows easier connection to community resources and reduces duplication. Nonprofit providers in Washington also underscored how direct service revealed system gaps, such as the link between behavioral health discharge and homelessness. These examples show that providers are indispensable connectors, ensuring that statewide policy is grounded in lived experience.

Recommendations

Takeaways from the two state cases point to several recommendations for policymakers and other education leaders to put into action. This section presents six recommendations that build on each other as shown in Figure 1. In the figure, each layer corresponds to one or more recommendations, with the first recommendations providing the base for the rest. The order, from bottom to top, shows how durable state approaches to developing policy and practice for HMY populations can build from foundational conditions toward targeted protections.

Figure 1. Summary of Recommendations by Level of Action



1. Combine State Alignment With Local Flexibility

Durable approaches require both top-down consistency and bottom-up flexibility. Interviews in Colorado underscored that local providers are already "absorbing different populations" because youth have overlapping needs and that families care more about services than which funding stream pays for those services. In practice, this means that when the state sets clear eligibility rules and stable funding mechanisms, local actors can focus on tailoring supports to individual students rather than on piecing together resources.

For example, Colorado's Educational Stability Grant provides a uniform framework that districts can count on (funding to address issues related to educational stability) while still allowing local providers to exercise discretion in determining how best to serve HMY within their contexts. Similarly, Washington's legislatively mandated PEI establishes a consistent mandate across the state, but implementation is left to districts that can adapt services to their communities' needs. This combination of state-level guardrails with local discretion ensures that effective practices spread beyond well-resourced districts while still giving providers the flexibility to innovate and respond quickly to families. Without both pieces, the support risk becomes either too fragmented (if left entirely to local discretion) or too rigid (if dictated solely by state rules).

2. Formalize Cross-Agency Expertise and Relationships

Both states' experiences highlight the importance—and vulnerability—of champions with cross-agency experience. Colorado respondents described how collaboration often depends on staff who know multiple systems and maintain informal networks, and they also warned that turnover jeopardizes progress. Washington illustrates how legislation can institutionalize collaboration, though interviewees there still raised concerns about continuity if there are leadership or staffing changes.

Although formal rotational programs across agencies do not currently exist (at least not as far as this paper's authors are aware), they could provide a promising model for states to consider, offering opportunities to build and draw from expertise across sectors, including education, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems. Beyond new models, states might also formalize cross-agency relationships through structures such as joint training, interagency agreements, and designated liaison roles, reducing reliance on informal connections alone.

3. Develop and Use Agreed-Upon Terminology for Stronger, Higher Quality Data Systems

Interviewees pointed to ambiguous terms such as "out-of-home placement" that created uncertainty about whether policies applied to detention, foster care, or psychiatric facilities. This lack of clarity slows identification and coordination, especially when combined with Colorado's restrictive privacy rules. Washington's HB 1955 standardized foster care definitions across statutes, and OSPI–DCYF agreements enabled near-real-time data sharing with schools and nonprofits. Taken together, these experiences suggest that states should convene interagency workgroups to harmonize definitions and agree on a small set of shared indicators tied directly to outcomes. Precise terminology and core indicators can make coordination more efficient while also balancing privacy with timely action.

4. Build Trust in Systems

Trust underpins cross-agency work, state–local partnerships, and engagement with HMY and families. Interviewees in both states described how collaboration depends on reliability and consistency, and research links trust with willingness to engage services (Niedlich et al., 2021). Trust is visible in behavior: When families believe providers will follow through, they are more likely to share sensitive information, show up for services, and stay engaged over time; when agencies trust each other, they exchange data more readily, align services, and rely on one another's expertise rather than duplicating efforts.

Practical steps include

- **being transparent about decisions and following through**, which demonstrates dependability;
- **including youth and families in planning so their perspectives are visibly reflected in outcomes**, which signals respect and accountability; and
- **investing in regular, structured opportunities for agencies, providers, and families to connect** so families and partners see that accountability is part of the system's culture.

5. Elevate Youth Voices

Young people are experts in what works. Their participation is both symbolic and practical. Both states have legislatively established youth advisory bodies, which have informed policies such as Washington's HB 1140 (ensuring legal representation for youth contacted by law enforcement) and Colorado's HB 18-1306 (supporting school stability for youth in foster care). For youth with lived experience, state and local entities should engage them in advisory councils, compensate participants, and demonstrate how their input has shaped decisions.

6. Strengthen Protections for Youth Who Are Migrant and Those Involved With the Justice System

Colorado and Washington both show that youth classified as migrant and those involved with the justice system face greater gaps in service delivery and identification compared to other HMY populations, such as youth experiencing foster care and those experiencing homelessness. In Colorado, youth identified as migrant are included in state initiatives. Still, youth involved with the justice system remain less integrated into stability efforts because of fragmented data and unclear agency responsibilities. In Washington, the reverse trend appears as youth involved with the justice system have gained statutory protections. In contrast, youth who are migrant remain largely absent from recent policy despite the state's large migrant student population. These gaps show how omission from statute can contribute to gaps in identification and uneven service delivery. States can respond by explicitly naming—in policies and funding streams—youth who are migrant and those who are justice-involved while also developing targeted strategies to address the barriers that keep support for these groups inconsistent.

Limitations

The interviews conducted for this paper reflect insights from a range of agencies and organizations in Colorado and Washington, but there are important limitations that shape the scope of the findings. In Colorado, the interview sample was heavily concentrated among state agency staff in education, with no representation from nonprofit organizations and only one school district. This likely skewed the perspective toward policy and administrative viewpoints while omitting the experiences of community-based organizations that are often central to service delivery for HMY.

In contrast, the Washington sample included a more diverse mix of state-level actors, nonprofits, and higher education partners but lacked representation from the OSPI or districts. As a result, perspective on the work being done in education, as well as some of the practical challenges of local implementation, may have been underrepresented.

Conclusion

These case studies highlight distinct state models of cross-sector policies and practices to support HMY populations. Colorado and Washington illustrate different pathways—one building from local innovation and the other formalizing collaboration through state policy. Each approach has strengths and limitations; no single model is ideal. Instead, the findings suggest that states have multiple options for leading cross-sector HMY work and point to the potential value of balancing different approaches.

In both Washington and Colorado, state agencies shaped cross-sector collaboration and leveraged policy and funding to drive systemic change. In a time of uncertainty about federal funding and policy direction, state-level leadership has become increasingly vital. These examples suggest that states can serve as laboratories for change, building systems that respond to the full spectrum of mobility-related challenges facing HMY within and beyond education.

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Appendix A: Information About Interview Participants

Table A1. Count of Colorado Interview Participants by Agency/Organization Type and Level of Service Delivery

	Education	Child welfare	Juvenile justice	Behavioral health	Housing
State level	12	0	0	0	0
Local level	1	0	0	0	0

Table A2. Count of Washington Interview Participants by Agency/Organization Type and Level of Service Delivery

	Education	Child welfare	Juvenile justice	Behavioral health	Housing
State level	0	2	1	0	5
Local level	1	0	0	1	0

Appendix B: Interview Coding

Table B1. Count and Percentage of Interviews in Which Participants Said That HMY Populations Were or Were Not Prioritized

	In Foster Care		Experiencing Homelessness		Justice-Involved		Migrant	
	CO	WA	CO	WA	CO	WA	CO	WA
Prioritized	4 (31%)	3 (33%)	4 (31%)	6 (67%)	2 (16%)	2 (22%)	5 (38%)	0
Not prioritized	0	0	0	0	2 (16%)	4 (44%)	0	0

Note. The table displays counts and percentages of interviews in which participants' responses reported that a certain population of HMY was prioritized or was not prioritized. *N* = 22 (CO *N* = 13, WA *N* = 9).

Table B2. Count and Percentage of Interviews in Which Participants Described Use of Best Practices and/or Challenges

	Integrated and system coherence		Monitoring		Preventative	
	CO	WA	CO	WA	CO	WA
Use of best practices	4 (31%)	5 (55%)	1 (8%)	4 (44%)	2 (15%)	4 (44%)
Challenges	4 (31%)	2 (22%)	4 (31%)	0	0	0

Note. The table displays counts and percentages of interview sessions in which participants reported successful use of best practices and/or challenges. *N* = 22 (CO *N* = 13, WA *N* = 9). A session could be coded as reporting both "best practices" and "challenges."

Appendix C: Policy Analysis

Table C1. Review of Recent Policies Related to Supports for HMY

	Legislation	Description	HMY population(s)	System integration	Preventative	Monitoring and accountability
WA	HB 1905 (2022) SB 6560 (2018)	Prevents youth from being discharged into homelessness from public systems of care, including behavioral health facilities, foster care, and juvenile justice institutions (HB 6560). HB 1905 established a Rapid Response Team and System of Care Grant Program for community-based services aimed at preventing youth from exiting systems of care into homelessness.	• Justice-involved • Experiencing homelessness • In foster care	Y	Y	N
WA	SB 5908 (2024)	All youth in foster care at age 18 can choose to remain in care until age 21. They have eligibility regardless of education, employment, or disability.	In foster care	N	Y	N
WA	HB 1227 (2021)	This bill raises the standard for child removal and promotes the use of preventative services to keep families intact and prioritizes kinship placements over foster care when removal is necessary.	In foster care	N	Y	N
WA	SB 6160 (2018)	Permits individuals convicted in adult court for crimes committed as minors to serve their sentences in juvenile rehabilitation facilities until the age of 25 rather than being transferred to adult correctional facilities at 21.	Justice-involved	N	Y	
WA	SB 6032 (2018) HB 1679 (2023)	This bill is a mandate directing the DCYF, OSPI, OHY, and Washington Student Achievement Council to convene a workgroup (Project Education Impact) with aligned nonprofits related to improving education outcomes for youth in foster care and youth experiencing homelessness (SB 6032). HB 1679 added youth involved with the justice system.	• Justice-involved • Experiencing homelessness • In foster care	Y	N	Y

	Legislation	Description	HMY population(s)	System integration	Preventative	Monitoring and accountability
WA	HB 1955 (2022)	This bill aligned foster care terminology in the education statute. Those in out-of-home care, in trial return home, in the care of a federally recognized Tribe, or in the federal unaccompanied refugee minors program will have consistent access to supports regardless of the legal status of their care or placement type.	In foster care	N	N	Y
WA	SB 6274 (2018) SB 5904 (2024)	SB 6274 created the Passport to College Promise program, provided by the College Success Foundation, to help students from foster care attend and succeed in college. It includes financial assistance for apprenticeships. Eligibility includes youth placed in WA from another state, youth in federal and Tribal foster care systems, and unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. SB 5904 allows students to receive state financial aid for the same amount of time they can receive federal financial aid. It also provides flexibility around expiration of use of funds for Passport Scholars.	In foster care	N	N	Y (SB 6274)
WA	SB 5290 (2019)	This bill phased out the practice of jailing youth for skipping school, running away, and other noncriminal offenses.	Justice-involved	N	N	N
WA	HB 2116 (2020)	This bill established a task force on improving institutional education programs and outcomes.	Justice-involved	N	N	N
CO	HB 18-1306 (Educational Stability Program; 2018)	This program awards grants to educational providers to provide academic and social–emotional services for youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, or youth from migrant backgrounds. Objectives include improving school attendance, reducing behavioral incidents, decreasing dropout rates, facilitating grade-level progression, and increasing graduation rates.	• In foster care • Experiencing homelessness	Y	Y	N

	Legislation	Description	HMY population(s)	System integration	Preventative	Monitoring and accountability
CO	HB 18-1306 (2018)	This bill provides funding supports for districts to implement ESSA mandates related to educational stability for students in foster care. It reduces school disruptions by keeping students in foster care enrolled in their school of origin, facilitates immediate enrollment in a school if a change is necessary, provides higher education assistance, and implements data collection and oversight by the Colorado Department of Education.	In foster care	N	N	N
CO	HB 20-1122 (2020)	This bill implemented an expanded age for eligible youth (24 years or younger), established a grant program to provide funding to organizations delivering direct services to youth who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness, and gives youth aged 15 and older the ability to receive shelter and services without parental approval.	Experiencing homelessness	N	Y	N
CO	HB 17-1283 (2017)	This bill established a task force to study and address the challenges faced by unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.	Experiencing homelessness	N	N	N

Appendix D: HMY Student Demographics and Educational Outcomes

Table D1. Share and Count of HMY in Public School in Colorado

Youth Who Are Migrant Share (%) of students in public school (count)	Youth Experiencing Homelessness Share (%) of students in public school (count)	Youth in Foster Care Share (%) of students in public school (count)	Youth Involved With the Juvenile Justice System Share (%) of students in public school (count)
0.4% (4,707)	1.8% (16,540)	0.5% (4,250)	0.6% (4,885)

Table D2. Share and Count of HMY in Public School in Washington

Youth Who Are Migrant Share (%) of students in public school (count)	Youth Experiencing Homelessness Share (%) of students in public school (count)	Youth in Foster Care Share (%) of students in public school (count)	Youth Involved With the Juvenile Justice System Share (%) of students in public school (count)
2.3% (30,489)	3.4% (37,614)	0.8% (8,898)	0.3% (3,703)

Table D3. Dropout Rates of HMY in CO and WA For Each Population and Relative to the State Average

(Rate of student population overall)	Youth Who Are Migrant Population dropout rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Experiencing Homelessness Population dropout rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth in Foster Care Population dropout rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Involved With the Juvenile Justice System Population dropout rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*
CO (2.1%)	4.6% (+2.5%)	4.8% (+2.7%)	5.5% (+3.4%)	N/A
WA (10%)	13.1% (+3%)	38.8% (+28.8%)	30.1% (+20.1%)	N/A

Table D4. 4-Year Graduation Rates of HMY in CO and WA Relative to the State Average

(Rate of student population overall)	Youth Who Are Migrant Population graduation rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Experiencing Homelessness Population graduation rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth in Foster Care Population graduation rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Involved With the Juvenile Justice System Population graduation rate *(Percentage points above or below state average)*
CO (83.1%)	62.2% (-20.9%)	58% (-25.1%)	36.2% (-46.9%)	N/A
WA (83.6%)	78.5% (-5.1%)	63.2% (-20.4%)	53.1% (-30.5%)	N/A

Table D5. Math Proficiency of HMY in CO and WA Relative to the State Average

(Rate of student population overall)	Youth Who Are Migrant Percentage of population proficient in math *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Experiencing Homelessness Percentage of population proficient in math *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth in Foster Care Percentage of population proficient in math *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Involved With the Juvenile Justice System Percentage of population proficient in math *(Percentage points above or below state average)*
CO (32.9%)	8.8% (-24.1%)	9% (-23.9%)	10% (-22.9%)	N/A
WA (39.1%)	14.1% (-25%)	14.1% (-25%)	14.3% (-24.8%)	N/A

Table D6. English Language Arts (ELA) Proficiency of HMY in CO and WA Relative to the State Average

(Rate of student population overall)	Youth Who Are Migrant Percentage of population proficient in ELA *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Experiencing Homelessness Percentage of population proficient in ELA *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth in Foster Care Percentage of population proficient in ELA *(Percentage points above or below state average)*	Youth Involved With the Juvenile Justice System Percentage of population proficient in ELA *(Percentage points above or below state average)*
CO (43.7%)	13.3% (-30.4%)	38.8% (-4.9%)	30.1% (-13.6%)	N/A
WA (50.7%)	22.7% (-28%)	22.4% (-28.3%)	22.4% (-28.3%)	N/A